



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A PEER REVIEWED AND INDEXED BI-ANNUAL ONLINE LITERARY JOURNAL

<http://www.worldlitolonline.net>

ISSN: 0974 - 097X VOL. 15 NO. I January - June, 2019



Binary - Sequence Paradigm in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

Dr. S. Priyadarshini.

Assistant Professor of English

Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, INDIA

Saul Bellow is regarded as one of the most celebrated authors of the twentieth century. His fiction typically addresses the meaning of human existence in an increasingly impersonal and mechanistic world. Writing in a humorous, anecdotal style, Bellow often depicts introspective individual sorting out a conflict between old world and new world values while coping with personal anxieties and aspirations. Bellow made serious literature about modern urban Jewish Americans possible. His fictions brought the immigrant Jewish sensibility, in all its restless striving and ethnic vividness, to national attention. With novel after impressive novel he slowly emerged as the only contemporary fictionist who could be mentioned in the same breath with Faulkner and Henry James. "Humor is an essential ingredient in Bellow's formula because wit (in his case, the Yiddish quip) is a traditional way that oppressed people counter the fists and guns of a majority culture" (Pinsker 154). Moreover, Humor is, in Bellow's words, "more manly" than complaint.

Seize the Day, the most reputed work of Bellow revolves around a single day in the life of a middle-aged flop. A series of bad decisions have forced Tommy Wilhelm, a former salesman for a line of kiddy furniture, to move to the Hotel Gloriana on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where his father, the icy Dr. Adler, can pay his bills and otherwise offer him fatherly aid and comfort. Dr. Adler, however, refuses - partly because Tommy changed his name from Wilhelm Adler when he dropped out of college to pursue an ill-fated career as a Hollywood actor and partly because Dr. Adler can scarcely bear to look at his untidy, altogether unpromising son.

In a work fairly bursting with water imagery, Tommy is always on the verge of drowning. His estranged wife makes increasingly shrill demands for money. His father refuses to carry Tommy, or anyone else for that matter, on his back. Finally, when a con man bilks Tommy out of his last dollars on an ill-advised plunge in the commodities market, he effectively hits rock bottom.

This paper makes an attempt to delve deep upon the structural pattern of the novel *Seize the Day*. It would be very abrupt to use Todorov's grammar of "parts of speech" in the novel to explore the pattern of the novel through empirico-analytical mode. According to the theory of grammar, there are two essential things: proposition and sequence, in a successful narrative. The proposition should be placed in the sequence to get the structural pattern of any discourse. A proposition is generally considered to be any small unit in a text. In the novel, the small units, as mentioned by Todorov can be extracted through A. J. Greimas' binaries: subject versus object, helper versus opponent, sender versus receiver. This is because the discourses, generally cannot escape from the classification of Greimas' binaries. These binaries should be placed in a sequence so as to form a structure. Todorov divides the sequences into three: logical, temporal and spatial. The propositions should fit into the context of the sequences in order to form the structural pattern of the novel. By intersecting Greimas' binary opposites with Todorov's sequences, the paradigm of the novel is traced. Thus, the overall intention of the paper is to trace the structural pattern in the novel *Seize the Day* of Saul Bellow using the binary opposites as horizontal axes and the sequences in the vertical axes forming the wholistic structure of the narrative pattern.

Dr. S. Priyadarshini.

The dualism of A. J. Greimas, in the novel, is taken for the proposition of Todorov and is related to the sequences. According to Todorov, there are three types of relation between proposition which characterize sequence: logical relation, temporal relation and spatial relation. Temporal relation is based on the time. The most obvious way in which the story and plot relate is in terms of time. If a story is a sequence of events then its temporal aspect must be presented in the narrative. A plot may, or may not have chronological sequence. A story may also start from the middle rather than the beginning, but it should have logical sequences. When it comes to a novel, a story or a plot, it instinctively implies the idea of a unity. It implies that the parts, the various individual have to hang together. There is the matter of cause and effect. In any discourse, the presence of causal effect is felt in order to comprehend it logically. If no connection is detected between them then there is no logic.

Spatial sequence is another best way to approach structuralism. Any uncoordinated plot can be systematically coordinated by arranging it into a number of set of units. These sets can be divided on basis of parallelism. A number of several similar things can constitute a set of units. The plot can also be structuralized systematically by the parallelism which is otherwise called spatial sequence. The presence of any of the sequence or all of the sequences is feasible in any story. In the chosen novel all the three sequences are present. In any sequence the most important component is the proposition. Thus, the three pairs of binary opposites of A.J.Greimas can be treated as propositions. Each proposition characteristically is related to each of the sequence of Todorov forming a cycle. Each of the proposition is dependent on particular sequence and each sequence is mutually linked with other.

The first category of binary opposites of A.J.Greimas is Subjective versus Objective dualism. The subject is the main character, the hero on whom the entire story relies. The object is sought for person. The object need not necessarily be a character in the story. It can also be an object which the hero desires to gain.

Seize the Day is a concise work which depicts Tommy's one day's fretful life. The subject versus object dualism is taken as a proposition providing Tommy as the subject Tommy involves in the quest for love and human value and that forms his object. Tommy Wilhelm is a middle-aged man, who has not so much failed as never made good. He is gigantic, handsome and hollow. Son of rich father, he is separated from his wife and children and is constantly being dunned for their support. He is out of work and is without prospect. So, he risks his last few hundred dollars in speculation on the commodities market. He has reached the point where he can do nothing but thrash about in his perplexity, try to borrow money from his irritated father. He begs to his father to let him out of his troubles and prays God,

Let me out of my trouble. Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself. For all the time I have wasted I am very sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into different life. For I am all balled up. Have mercy.(30)

But God does not hear him and his father continues to rebuff him, and his speculation leads to disaster. Deprived of his father's case he seeks love from other characters in the novel. The most important among all is Dr. Tamkin. He finds a father-figure in Dr. Tamkin and makes him his surrogate father. He is already warned by his father not to trust Tamkin and he himself knows that Tamkin is not trust-worthy. Yet he invests his money with Tamkin in the commodities market and is wiped out of his money. He turns to his father for help. The help here refers not only to money but also to his father's care and love. But he gets none of either from his father. At last Tommy is found at the coffin of a stranger, in a funeral home he has entered by accident, Sobbing his heart out over his plight.

In a climatic ending, deceived by Tamkin, Tommy reaches the market only to know he has been stripped naked of the money. Tommy searches Tamkin in vain. He reaches the hotel in a futile hope to see Tamkin but he did not find him there. Despite of knowing the fact that his father would not heed to his appeal, he makes a complaint to his father. Having rejected by his father in cruel manner, he goes desperately out of the hotel and starts to walk on the street. Suddenly he catches sight of Tamkin and rushes after him into a funeral chapel and is transmitted away among the mourners. On seeing the stranger dead into a coffin, Tommy releases all his pent-up emotions.

The final climatic ending of the novel may seem to be incomplete because a problem has been introduced and has been intensified and finally ends without a solution to the problem. But various critics like Malcolm Bradbury opines that this final scene of the novel provides a perfect finishing. This final scene is also considered to be a rebirth of Tommy and has an optimistic air in it. Through the dead man he sees the entire humanity and realizes the meaning of the life.

There is minute thread connecting this last scene is seen in the very first chapter of the novel in the very first line: “when it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought...” (7). This forms a kind of prolepsis, a technique by which a narrative interrupt the main story time with an event, or events, that properly belong to its future. In order to give more stress to the climate ending of the novel, the same line is emphasized in another place in the following manner: “He was wrong to suppose that he was more capable than the next fellow when it came to concealing his troubles” (18). Thus, the more stress on the climax shows that the plot is structured in such a way that it has given much importance to the effect rather than the cause. The presence of the logical sequence is also felt when the thread that connects the final scene from the first chapter is discovered. Moreover, the plot is also linear forming the logical relation from one episode to other.

The helper versus opponent dualism is also well exploited in *Seize the Day* Tommy Wilhelm finds his father unkind and unsympathetic towards him. On other hand he trusts Tamkin who is a brilliant deceiver. According to Tommy, his father is his opponent and he considers Dr. Tamkin as his helper. The language of Tamkin makes a great impact on the mind of Tommy. When comparing Tamkin with his father, his father is too concrete for him. His father, for instance, asks him not to make too much of his problem. Tommy is very offensive of this statement. But when the same advice is given by Dr. Tamkin, he admires him. Tamkin asks him not to marry the suffering. The language of Tamkin is very impressive to Tommy. According to Tommy, Dr. Adler does not care for him. He wants to get rid of both Tommy and his sister. But the consolation is found in Dr. Tamkin. This made Tommy to think his father as an opponent and Dr. Tamkin as the helper. But the helper and opponent in this novel is seen only through eyes of Tommy. But one cannot thrust a character's view that is constantly in a flux.

In reality, Dr. Adler cares for Tommy. He asks his son to avoid using much drugs, he wants his son to be smart. He does not encourage pampering his son. He wants his son to solve his own problems. A father cannot expect all these from his son unless he cares for him, Indeed, Dr. Adler is ready to bring Tommy into medical field if he has not gone to Hollywood. His father's attitude towards his son can be justified to great extent. Whereas Tommy's harbinger of hope, Dr. Tamkin is a great deceiver. Whether he is a liar or fraud is not known but he deceives a soul who really holds him at an honorable place. In spite of all the warnings of Dr. Adler against Tamkin, Tommy Willingly becomes his prey. Tamkin is also an interesting character in the novel. Despite of many lies in Tamkin's bragging, there are few truths which are amazing and amusing to Tommy. According to Tommy, Tamkin is a man who comes to help him. He always vilifies his father. On taking helper versus opponent dualism as a proposition it will not be difficult to place it in the spatial sequence. As the plot is constructed in a linear pattern, the events are arranged sequentially except few analepsis. This serves as retrospection but is explained by the omniscient narrator.

The temporal sequence in the novel can be analyzed through equilibrium. According to Todorov, any complete plot is a shift from one equilibrium, to another. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement. In this temporal sequence the proposition, helper versus opponent plays an important part. Between the two state of equilibrium, there are two periods which leads to either of the equilibrium. The two periods are the period of imbalance and the period of improvement. The period of imbalance appears after the initial equilibrium. While the period of improvement appears before the final state of equilibrium. Both of these periods are occupied by helper and opponent. The period of imbalance is dominated by Dr. Adler who is a helper, in reality and the period of improvement is dominated by Dr. Tamkin who is an opponent in reality.

According to Todorov, this proposition can be taken as part of speech, then the two agents that corresponds to proper noun are Dr. Adler and Dr. Tamkin. The predicate is ‘helping’ and ‘opposing.’ As the theory states, one verb should precede over the other. That is, ‘helping’ is preceded by ‘opposing.’ Without the opposition, the value of the help offered by his father is not recognized by Tommy. The helper versus opponent dualism is not clear in the novel at the beginning because of the presence of omniscient narrator and Tommy’s misrepresented point of view. Thus, in this way the proposition plays a vital role in the temporal sequence.

The next proposition extracted from the binary opposites of A.J.Greimas is sender versus receiver which is placed in spatial sequence. The spatial sequence relates the parallelism between Dr.Tamkin and Dr.Adler both Tamkin and Adler are senders. They send their care and advice to Tommy Wilhelm. Under such criteria Tommy becomes receiver. But Tommy receives only what Dr.Tamkin sends him. He rejects his father’s sending because of his prejudices against his father. Therefore, Tommy cannot fully be called a receiver as he fails to receive a part which he ought to receive.

It is obvious that the sender is Tamkin and Adler and the receiver is Tommy. Tommy receives the guidance only from Tamkin ignoring Adlers making Tommy an incomplete receiver. So, Tommy becomes a receiver to Tamkin and the negation of receiver to Adler. If he is not fully a receiver then he is someone who is not receiving. The one who does not receive can be equated with sender. Therefore, Tommy can be taken for sender. Not only this, the entire story is seen through the eyes of Tommy. So, it becomes his duty to assign particulars status to other characters. In this manner, he has assigned the status of cruel and unkind father to Dr. Adler and the status of surrogate father to Dr. Tamkin and he becomes a sender in this sense too. Thus, the proposition aptly settles itself in the spatial sequence.

Each of the sequence is related to other in one way or other. The temporal sequence deals with time and the spatial sequence deals with parallelism of events. While noting the parallelism it becomes inevitably important to take time into account. The time also paves way to the logical sequence. On dividing cause and effect in logical sequence, it becomes easy to place the effect and trace out the cause in the course of the novel. Only time helps to find the cause. It is evident that all the sequences form a structured cycle. Logically any completed plot should have the initial clause in the end forming a cycle. Thus, Todorov explains the cycle in the following fashion:

An organized succession of clauses forms a new syntagmatic pattern, sequence. Sequence is perceived by the reader as a finished story; it is the minimal narrative in completed form. This impression of completion is caused by a modified repetition of the initial clause; the first and the last clause will be identical but they will either have a different mood or status. (2104)

Any story starts with a normal condition and undergoes a trouble and the trouble is intensified and finally it returns to the normal condition. This is the basic structure of all novels. But the most highlighting pattern in the chosen novel of Saul Bellow is that the sequences present itself in the vertical axes and the binary opposites place itself in horizontal axes forming a paradigm.

Works Cited

Bellow, Saul. *Seize the day*. Greenwich: Fawcett, 1965. Print.

Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Pinsker, Sanford. “Saul Bellow: ‘What in All of This, Speaks for Man?’” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. ed. Janes P. Draper, et al. Vol. 79. Detroit: Gale, 1994. Print. 80 vols.

Todorov, Tzvetan. “Structural Analysis of Narrative.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and criticism*.ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2000. 2090 – 106. Print.